

## BRIEF REVIEWS

William Fuller, *Hallucination*. Chicago: Flood Editions, 2011. 74pp.  
\$14.95

The first section of William Fuller's new collection closes with "Morning Sutta," which reads in its entirety:

flying limpid  
bramble drop

verdant nebbe  
of two *tartari*

startled bright  
concrete stair

With its compressed opacities and conceptual sweep, the piece might serve as an emblem for the poet's procedures throughout this thorny, formidable book. The final stanza revises, word by word, the first: the present act of *flying* seized up into *startled*; the transparency of *limpid* turned to the reflective *bright*; the pastoral *bramble* replaced by the urban *concrete*; and the climactic, potentially tragic *drop* transmuted into *stair*'s cold comedy. Appearing in the mediating role between these vignettes is a deeply recalcitrant couplet. Even after one determines that *nebbe* is a Middle English term for beak (or metaphorically a mouth or the nub of a pen) and considers that *tartari* might find origins in the Mongolian steppes or Argive underworld, the lines are not easily parsed into paraphrase. Perhaps the "verdant nebbe" is that from which the ink of the stanza flows? The "two *tartari*" the separate encasements for each of the poem's images? Or maybe the stanza's function is more purely formal: sonically introducing the "t" that will dominate the final couplet, metrically mediating the first line's trochees and the fifth line's cretic with a third line suggesting either. Are we sure, after all, that the fourth line is meant to modify the third? Sustained attention to such questions seems almost to invite the poem to dismantle itself, to reveal the illusory type of apparent connections. What about the title? Buddhist *suttas*, from the Sanskrit for "thread," pass down the oral teachings of Gautama; Hindi *suttas* are cigarettes. Is this a meditation on what is behind the evanescent threads of human language that binds the world together? Or is it a throwaway smoke, flicked into the brush to land on a sunlit step?

Sonic precision and syntactic ambiguity; metaphysical labyrinths lurking within mundanest experience; a smattering of antiquarian vocabulary: these stylistic hallmarks were evident in Fuller's earlier Flood Editions volumes, 2006's *Watchword* and 2003's magisterial *Sadly*. The relative priority of dissonant sound structure over straightforward sense reflects the author's longtime status as a midwestern fellow traveler of Language writing, particularly in its Bay Area incarnation. (Fuller's initial book-length publications were with Leslie Scalapino's O Books.) At the same time, the persistent impression that sense fracturing offers a means to uncover correspondences occulted by the habits of everyday speech and practice places Fuller somewhat to the side of the linguistic skepticism characteristic of the avant-gardes of recent decades: the negativity of this onetime Renaissance scholar seems very much in the service of a *via negativa*.

Where *Hallucination* diverges from Fuller's other recent work is in the intensity with which it involutes and impacts its particles of perception and reflection. Gone, or at least decidedly underemphasized, are the relatively extended lyric gestures that punctuated earlier volumes like miniature arias, offering the consolation of shapeliness even as they resisted the intellect. (I have in mind such poems as *Sadly*'s "The Later Powers" or *Watchword*'s "Middleless.") In *Hallucination*, gnarled couplets and quatrains predominate, and even the poised sentences of the book's several pieces in prose threaten to "flake apart," in the piquant phrase of "For Dally Kimoko." Trawling through a landscape marked by dead branches, bare trees, black snow, and fog, these distanced and shadowy poems seem consistently disoriented, hung up on matters of scale: "The light in the window is far larger than the earth"; "an entire human being is smaller than a snail." In the background, the inescapable chatter of business hums with its rates and percentages, approval processes, and transubstantiated alpha.

That last detail may offer a modicum of insight into the dour tonality suffusing *Hallucination*. His day job as trust officer and senior vice president at Chicago's Northern Trust Company no doubt afforded Fuller an intimate vantage point for 2008's abyssal crisis in the global financial markets. Unnervingly prescient lines (such as "the property of each occupies its own house") attest to how financialization provides one answer to the titular poem's query, "How is it by occult operation ordinary things occur?" The monetary system that Simmel characterized as "representations not at all identical with objective being" offers a highly salient instance of collective hallucination, one that is intertwined, if not identical, with such other elaborate fictions as the state and the law. Despite their origins in tenuous institutional agreements and unpredictable affective relationships, all these systems can nonetheless have real, damaging physical effects: in the vision of finance (and, at the same time, poetry) proffered by the prose piece "Miwa-San," "there is always the

risk of having your head split open from improper technique.”

While the social underpinnings of exchange and power offer one direction for reading Fuller’s title, hallucination is not just subject but also method here—and all the more so given the poet’s significant investment in etymology. *Hallucinate* descends from the Latin *alucinari*, to wander in mind. Speculation sees in that earlier infinitive a privative *a-* affixed to a form of light, *lux, lucis*. The word shows up, for instance, in a letter of Cicero to his brother Quintus, in which he asserts that their relationship might allow for a letter that digresses without a fixed topic, and goes on to register subjugations and demands discussed in the Senate before turning to poetry. Lucretius, the Roman says, sparkles with genius, despite his laborious technique, but anyone who can read Sallustius’s *Empedoclea* is more than human (all the more so today; the poem is known only through this reference). As *Hallucination* itself wanders insistently and fretfully through evanescent moods, bureaucratic meditations, or semantic drifts and sediments, it, too, labors and sparkles, and seems at times, like the philosopher hero of Sallustius’s lost epic, perched on the volcano’s lip.

Consider, for instance, the peregrinations of the extended lyric “The Elixir,” which occupies a central spot in the collection. The poem opens with a fitful profusion of forms: an italicized voice-over promising relief from unspecified symptoms, in tones that range from the Californian (“from harsh to mellow”) to the Prynish (“tutelary / update deficiency tabs”), yields to a skewed quest scenario, with the narrator accompanied by the mythic and contested figure of Prester John through a space at once pastoral and urban: “steel stairs lead up an embankment.” Most of “The Elixir” unfolds as clipped couplets, which seem to trace out a hazy set of vignettes blending travel narrative, visionary meditation, and glimpses of slapstick. A caravan winds down a mountain, its rug masters bound in nylon; a dead duck proclaims the fatality of consciousness; a leafless tree stands beside a pond in what might be a waking dream.

As it weaves its fragmentary vistas, “The Elixir” calls upon Fuller’s characteristic range of reference. The legacy of Modernist poetics as epitomized by Auden, Williams, and Stevens respectively seems to lie behind invocations of “the classic age // of limestone,” “the red wagon / goes boom,” and the “pure figure” that bleeds through the walls only to begin “strumming away.” These fugitive allusions suggest one understanding of the “consociation / of idiosyncrasies” that doesn’t seem quite up to paying the rent, the ghosts that “ribbon” through the torpor of institutional life. Derivatives and hedges, leases and ground rents may pervasively structure even our contemporary sense of time, so that the question that haunts each day in “The Elixir” is whether it will bring excess or the drop. But the poem closes by insisting

on the possibility of transfiguration, however ironically deflated by the odd yellow vests Fuller's "solemn companions" don as they "wade out / into the heat," whether the brutal sunshine of a Chicago summer or the refining fire that might yield Paracelsus's *spiritum arcanum*.

"Glancing back / without remembering" runs the final couplet of "The Elixir," and this might serve in its own way as a credo of Fuller's poetics, with its prismatic evocations of the literary past and its seeming resolute refusal to generate totalities. The "lightning chain" that binds "The Elixir" to the medieval alchemists functions as visibly in its prepositions as in its scintillant, wayward propositions: the clusters of *ups* and *downs*, *ins* and *aways* create a literary contour rife with meaningful slippages, but treacherous for the unwary readerly foot. In "The Circuit," the prose poem mashing Zeno with Kafka that closes the volume, a hapless office worker bears a report that slowly grows to the size of a planet, even as it remains stubbornly unreadable. If the observing narrator has turned away from that unedifying spectacle to bear his own report, it's one that, for all its extraterrestrial gravity, remains compelling and compulsively readable—and human-sized.

John Beer

§

Karin Lessing, *Collected Poems*. Bristol, UK: Shearsman, 2010. 209pp. \$22

Karin Lessing, an American born on the Germany-Poland border and for decades a resident of Provence, is a poet of extreme concision. Although her *Collected Poems* gathers over three decades of writing, the book numbers just 209 pages, many of them bearing but a few exacting words. Lessing has gained little recognition during her long career, but this collection makes it clear that she is an essential poet. Her work draws from a range of poetic lineages and their styles: Objectivist attentiveness, Olson and Creeley's projective poetics of breath, Celan's spare hermeticism, Char's transfigured Provençal landscapes, Mallarmé and du Bouchet's poetics of the page. How might a poem register a place? How might a poem register breath as it emerges into speech? Who speaks in a poem, and to whom? Animated by these questions, Lessing's poems enact small dramas of abstraction: landscape becomes language; person becomes voice; voice becomes writing. These lyrics sound out the limits of such abstraction, perching on the point where landscape nearly vanishes into air and where speech nearly vanishes into silence.

Lessing's first collection, *The Fountain*, published by Eliot Weinberger's Montemora Foundation in 1982, establishes the landscape poem as her

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Lessing's first collection, *The Fountain*, published by Eliot Weinberger's Montemora Foundation in 1982, establishes the landscape poem as her

dominant mode. She writes with a discerning eye and an especially sensitive ear. The poems register stone and wind, such prominent elements of Lessing's Provence, as audible atmospheres. Consider "Moraine," the title of which names both piles of debris deposited by glaciers and flowerbeds made of stones:

Through  
thyme  
  
braided  
to thyme  
  
followed  
the scent that  
  
tumbles,  
breast-  
  
high, dream-  
thin.  
  
Un-  
thinking,  
  
saw;  
blinded,  
  
heard  
how they lie  
  
cluster and  
stray,  
  
sometimes  
seem to float.

Its title insists on heaviness, but the poem works like a spell to levitate stone. The solidity of rock is quickly paired with the airiness of scent, and the profusion of long vowel sounds in the opening lines plays gravity against the suspension of the words by careful line breaks. Lessing's auditory deliberations yield not only intricately balanced sound structures but also new meanings: broken across two lines, "Un- / thinking" becomes not a folly but

a process of undoing, a kind of thinking against thinking. Mind gives way to eye, and eye gives way to ear. By translating stones into audible syllables that “cluster and / stray,” Lessing’s poem lets earth take to air, just as, from a certain distance and angle, the stones of a moraine may seem to float. The poem thus carries out a paradoxical kind of abstraction. It vividly evokes the Provençal landscape, but in its lyric flight, particularity of place is swept up into the generality of language. The poems of *The Fountain* attain remarkable material definition on both page and tongue, but again and again, that materiality nearly vanishes into the white of the page or dissipates into air as the poem is pronounced. And although she seems resolutely embodied in a particular landscape, the poet herself becomes just a written voice, emptied of personal content so that the elements may become audible in her syllables.

In *The Winter Dream Journals* (Shearsman, 1991) Lessing exchanges the hard lines of stone and wind for the ambiguities of dreams. The book’s first section consists of prose poems, such as “Twilight World Visions,” which begins:

Reading the twilight world visions.

The rock as a gentle shoulder. They were all saying the same thing while clouds gathered to cirrus. This was older than stone, lighter than grass and yet like grass. I cried out in my sleep.

In “Moraine,” each word and line seems bound to the others by tensile force, but in these poems, sentences rest and jostle against each other more loosely. The poet who listens to landscape has become the poet who reads her own dreams. While the principle units of Lessing’s earlier poems are the syllable and the word, here the principle unit is the sentence. Lessing’s prose affords the grammar and tone of direct statement even as her sudden swerves and obscurities subvert clear communication; the poems, like dreams, feel familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Missing antecedents remain missing; images wobble and slip into others. The question of contiguity comes to the fore in the second section of *The Winter Dream Journals*, which consists of thirty four-line stanzas, each a separate poem:

To the farthest edge of sailing  
I who deploys  
Distance surpassing tide obliterates  
Hard by horizon like a flocculence

The initial capitalization of each line, unusual in Lessing’s work, accentuates their independence from one another, and while the four lines clearly hang together, they are neither clearly end-stopped nor clearly enjambed. Like the thirty poems placed next to each other, these phrases hover in indeterminate

relation. Is distance something deployed, or is it the force that obliterates? Or does distance surpass and the tide obliterate? What is obliterated? In any case, the poet holds the first person at some distance: there is an “I who deploys,” but as a “floculence,” it is dispersed and suspended.

Lessing’s fourth book, *In The Aviary of Voices* (Shearsman, 2001), returns to the landscape mode of *The Fountain* but retains the tonal breadth of *The Winter Dream Journals*. The book’s title seems an apt figure for Lessing’s work as a whole: a chamber in which voices, only tenuously attached to bodies, resonate with one another. Its title sequence is perhaps the most dispersed of Lessing’s poems, but now the poet seems harrowed by such dispersal:

Someone

it wasn’t you

said

Hello!

Hello!

I could have killed  
you

invisible, invisible  
you

•

in the aviary of voices

we speak the language

the same

in and out/between staves

that

never touch

we

tear

Lessing’s *Collected Poems* is a strangely unpopulated book. The poet usually seems isolated in the landscape. We glimpse ghostly pronouns in her dreams,



but they offer little society; one finally dreams alone. In this third collection, the second-person pronoun appears more frequently, but here the first person struggles to locate the other voice she hears. Was it “you”? Is there a “you”? The “I” is strong enough to deploy its rage, but its voice—again—seems nearly obliterated. To write poems is necessarily to abstract words from the persons who speak them, including the person of the poet herself. This poem dramatizes that abstraction as a kind of madness, the madness of hearing disembodied voices. But the voices disembodied in Lessing’s writing may be reembodyed by readers interested not only in the precise images and complex ideas the poems articulate, but also in the pleasures these poems afford ear and tongue. By giving body and breath to the voices on the page, we may join the poet to become “we” who “speak the language.”

Patrick Morrissey

§

Catherine Mavrikakis, *Flowers of Spit*. Translated by Nathanaël. Toronto: BookThug, 2012. 246pp. \$18

*Flowers of Spit* is a novel-length monologue of excessive proportions—unctuous, flowering with surprisingly affecting spikes of empathy. Its themes of memory and madness are borne along not by events but by the intensity of its decadent style, phrase by gemmy, gore-slick phrase. As befits a novel with a Baudelairean title, the narrator Flore Forget is a *chirurgienne maudite*, an emergency room surgeon, and the Québécoise daughter of a French woman who fled Normandy after World War II. She is a devastated pill-popper enraged by her mother’s recent death from cancer, which she views as the latest thrust in Life’s offensive against her. Flore Forget, lady sawbones on Life’s battlefield, of course cannot forget. She announces herself on the novel’s first page as an avenging angel, but also, one guesses, one doomed to fall in flight:

A bad mayonnaise. That’s what I make of life. I sack, I ravage, I ruin, I pulverise. I have mad dreams of eradicating ease. Proudly, I swagger, full of myself, looking like a purple soldier with my greedy, smug, G.I. mug. I think desperately of wrenching life from the dung heap on which it grows so abundantly, the whore. I think I’m a gust of wind, a fierce gale, a tidal wave, a north-wester, a tempest. I’m all about the last judgment. I’m pregnant with tactical raids against immensity. I am the justiciary of desperate life.

As this first salvo makes clear, Flore makes war through her textual excesses; their sumptuous expanse marks the fitful field of battle, and Mavrikakis’s

allusion, to Baudelaire, Duras, and, of course, with its canny names, family doppelgangers, and tragicomic instincts, to Nabokov. The book is rich with both farcical and trenchant episodes, brilliant thumbnail character sketches, nacreous epigrams, and heady bilious torrents of workplace spleen. The narrative's persistent doubling—Flore's hatred for Life and preservation of it; her resistance to and infection by the contact with other humans—meets Mavrikakis and Nathanaël's doubled prose style to configure a radiantly fulgurating novel.

Joyelle McSweeney

§

*Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing.* Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011. 593pp. \$45

Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's claim that conceptual writing is our contemporary instantiation of avant-garde poetry and that *Against Expression* is its official debut assumes that the manipulation of literary institutions from *within* their centers of power is a vanguardist enterprise. This anthology is therefore an experiment in the mobilization of academic institutions not as patron of innovative poetry but as manager of literary history in real time. As their respective introductions attest, Dworkin and Goldsmith are highly self-aware of the sociological function of the literary anthology. Anthologists typically determine literary value by judging what constitutes good or significant writing; Dworkin and Goldsmith leverage the power of the anthology to determine simply what counts as literature. For Dworkin, the category of the literary is a function of specific publishing histories. "Context is everything," he writes repeatedly. This means that *Against Expression* includes writing previously published by definitively literary presses, as well as "non-literary" writing now constituted as literary by virtue of context. "Even in the case of the few exceptions to our [literary] focus," writes Dworkin, "all of the texts included are presented here, in the new context of this anthology, as literary." One can almost hear Dworkin echoing Robert Rauschenberg's infamous telegram to Iris Clert: "THE TEXTS PRESENTED HERE ARE LITERARY IF I SAY SO."

The editorial focus on the category of the literary is meant to be recuperative, to take upon itself the task of bringing literary history up to speed with art history and restaging the same interventions within institution literature that the historical avant-garde staged within institution art in the last century. In a 2010 interview, Lytle Shaw asked Goldsmith why conceptual writing had become increasingly synonymous with the technique of appropriation.

In response, Goldsmith told a familiar story: in 1959, Brion Gysin claimed that writing was fifty years behind painting, and fifty years later his statement still holds true. This time Goldsmith went so far as to argue that, with the emergence of Pop Art in the 60s and Consumer Art in the 80s, “the art world went through postmodernism and poetry didn’t.” In the introduction to *Against Expression*, Goldsmith’s rhetoric makes the situation seem dire: “From Napster to gaming, from karaoke to BitTorrent files, the culture appears to be embracing the digital and all the complexity it entails—with the exception of writing.”

The paradox of conceptual writing is that its radical break with supposedly retrograde literary institutions needs authorization—not antagonism—from those institutions before it can become visible as literary practice in the first place. *Against Expression* contains evidence everywhere of its roots in the academy. It is no secret that Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein have played a significant role in nurturing the reception of conceptual writing within the academy. Even so, the size of their presence in and around *Against Expression* is remarkable. Perloff is one of the volume’s dedicatees, and one of the general editors of the series in which the book appears, Northwestern University’s Avant-Garde and Modernism Collection. Meanwhile, Bernstein is one of only three core Language poets who appear in the anthology (Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman are the other two); at twenty-five pages, his work ties Goldsmith’s for the largest portfolio in the volume. Bernstein’s name also opens the book jacket copy. Conceptual writing has come to name an insider’s game among writers officially sanctioned by—and marketed by—prominent poetry critics.

A different kind of academicism characterizes Dworkin’s earlier *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (a collection housed in Goldsmith’s online avant-garde art database, UbuWeb). That anthology’s great strength lies in its scholarly ambition to define the parameters of a new, cross-disciplinary literary and art history. Dworkin takes conceptualist trends in contemporary experimental poetry as points of access to a moment in the 60s and 70s when a multimedia aesthetic flourished around text-based practices in Fluxus, performance art, concrete poetry, and other fields spread across the gallery, the art space, and the printed page. The UbuWeb anthology devises “conceptual writing” as a heuristic that brings into focus previously obscured constellations and genealogies of literary and art historical movements. Its provocations for further redrawing the map are considerable: connections emerge, for instance, between a first generation of conceptual writers (Vito Acconci, Bernadette Mayer, and others) and early figures in Language poetry.

*Against Expression*, on the other hand, provides much flimsier historical frames for conceptual writing. The anthology’s archive exceeds Dworkin’s

earlier effort in its historical depth and breadth (stretching from Diderot to Duchamp and Mallarmé to Mac Low), but the selection of appropriation-based texts from multifaceted oeuvres reduces the richness of the archive to what the anthology's narrowed definition of the conceptual can accommodate. The editors highlight appropriation-based works to underscore a paradox described in both of their introductions: texts rooted in found and sourced material demonstrate that literature has finally overcome its taboo on the unoriginal, the uncreative, and the nonexpressive. Digital culture has supposedly changed our very concepts of textual production, while at the same time the self-conscious plagiarism of a Diderot or a Yeats shows that the situation in literature has never been otherwise. In other words, the anthology's presentation of its own archive verges on the ahistorical and the transhistorical simultaneously. The book's organization seems in fact to hinder the historicizing work that might be done with its materials: an alphabetized table of contents dispenses with the chronological, geographical, sociological, or even formal categories that might reveal features common to the literary history of appropriation.

Putting the editorial rhetoric to one side, a simpler way of judging the anthology is to consider whether it draws attention to any deserving but neglected poets. Consider the case of Christopher Knowles, whose writing appears in print for the first time since 1979 in *Against Expression*. Along with Acconci, Mayer, and Mac Low, Knowles should stand at the head of any historical account of protoconceptual and conceptual writing, and his work deserves the renewed attention that these other authors have enjoyed in recent years. On that last account, Dworkin and Goldsmith have done valuable work as anthologists and literary historians, providing two ample selections from Knowles's out-of-print and nearly forgotten book of procedural and visual texts, *Typings* (Vehicle Editions, 1979). The editors' introductory note highlights the literary-musical-dramatic collaboration among Knowles, Robert Wilson, and Philip Glass that generated many of the texts collected in *Typings*. But this note and the anthology's paratexts in general fail to capture Knowles's work in the right historical frame or formal categories. We get Christopher Knowles the appropriationist, who by surfing his radio dial and grafting song lyrics into his writing algorithms became "a pop-infused update to Steinian concerns"—but not Knowles the emergent figure in a late-60s and early-70s New York art and performance scene with definite ties to the legacy of Minimalism. We also get Knowles the rigid proceduralist, whose computational approach to the "processing and parsing of language" anticipates web-generated works of conceptual writing—but not Knowles the autistic poet whose work John Ashbery called "pure conceptualism" in a review because the rigidity of its structures came

from the rigor of Knowles's own thinking and from the idiosyncratic and ephemeral character of his procedures. And perhaps more than any other author included in *Against Expression*, Knowles's work is undoubtedly marred by the poetics of unoriginality and nonexpressivity imputed to it. Knowles's conceptual procedures put the thought of a particular mind—his own—into form, and perhaps the humanist presumptions of the term “expression” are worth retaining if they help distinguish a mind like his from the kind of automated algorithmic processes that he bested with a radio and a typewriter.

To pit contemporary conceptual writing categorically *against expression* is to take aim at the confessional lyric, which means reviving the felled enemy of Language poetry only to knock it down once again. This tactic entirely misses the opportunity to emphasize what might really distinguish a conceptual poetics and our current “conceptual moment,” as Goldsmith routinely calls the present time. Dworkin gets closest to the heart of conceptual writing when he suggests, too offhandedly, that its own “guiding concept... may be the idea of language as quantifiable data.” Framed in this way, conceptual writing could be understood as the extracurricular enterprise of two professional archivists, who daily enhance the scope of material out of which anthologies like *Against Expression* get produced. Writing, in other words, as compiling and organizing. But conceptual writing has been from the beginning a curriculum of its own. As a foundational text in this curriculum, *Against Expression* sets out to document a transnational contemporary poetry movement, archive its historical antecedents, and accelerate its reception within the academy. The anthology comes up short in framing and historicizing the conceptual because its editors have relied too heavily on avant-garde tropes borrowed from the visual arts in order to make an academic intervention. If Dworkin and Goldsmith were to resituate the emergence of conceptual writing more firmly within the twentieth-century history of new media practices across the disciplines rather than post-Duchampian art history, the enterprise could generate an effective alternative *literary* history. The project could also make real metacritical interventions in areas relevant to its true preoccupation with the archive, such as the politics of information access, file sharing, digitization, and preservation practices. But perhaps Dworkin and Goldsmith have simply failed in their branding of contemporary poetry, having chosen the wrong postmodernism to graft onto it. For a title that would have gestured toward the watershed moment not only for American conceptual art but also for its intermedial crosscurrents, while foregrounding the importance of contemporary media practices to their authors' work, the editors could have given us an *Anthology of Information Writing*. Instead we have *Against Expression*.

Andrew Peart